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AUTHOR Cummings, Melbourne S.
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ABSTRACT

This discussion of the roles portrayed by blacks in media begins by describing stereotyping in pre-television film and radio, and examining television shows from the 1950s until the early 1980s which included black characters to show that this stereotyping has continued until very recently. The shows covered in this context include "Beulah," "Make Room for Daddy," "The Jack Benny Program," "Trouble with Father," "The Amos 'n Andy Show," "Julia," "Sanford and Son," "Good Times," "The Jeffersons," "What's Happening," "Diff'rent Strokes," "Webster," and "Gimme a Break." Three more recent series that have finally begun to depict the black family seriously--"The Cosby Show," "Charlie and Company," and "227"--are then discussed at length. Characters, situations, and issues with which the shows deal are presented, compared, and contrasted, and it is concluded that "The Cosby Show" and "227" are well on the way to changing the stereotypical image of the black family on television in the United States. Six references are listed. (MES)

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THE CHANGING IMAGE OF THE BLACK FAMILY ON TELEVISION

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by

Melbourne S. Cummings, Ph.D.

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Historically, black people have been given roles in the media that have tended to strengthen and perpetuate the negative stereotypical images that whites have created. Despite how blacks had been depicted in the popular media of film and radio previously, however, television was held out as the medium of the future which would reverse the misinformation that had surrounded blacks.

When they were shown in films and radio broadcasts, black people were maids, janitors, shoe shine boys, cooks, waiters, wet nurses, all, of course, with distorted racial characteristics. They shuffled, rather than walked; they popped and rolled their eyes; they giggled, never laughed or smiled. These were the characteristics that talented Black actors and actresses were called upon to portray because white audiences found these traits lovable, enjoyable, funny, entertaining, and controllable. And if these actors were to practice their art and find their livlihood in these media they had to perform as they were told, no matter how demeaning the role or unflattering the image that was made.

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During the beginning years,, television promised to be colorblind; that any programs treating race would do so with dignity and objectivity; and that racial types would not be depicted in a manner that would ridicule or demean. (1)

On variety shows like ED SULLIVAN's, TOAST OF THE TOWN, and STEVE ALLEN'S TONIGHT SHOW, blacks indeed were given equitable, non-stereotypical, unbiased "roles" to play. They displayed their musical and comedic talents along with their white counterparts. Later, on quiz shows, they were allowed to show their intelligence as they won large sums of money for answering challenging questions.

When television showed blacks in situation comedies or dramas where they had supporting roles they were given roles that supported the stereotypical images created from fiction, movies and radio. The roles of (a) the black mammy on shows like BEULAH and MAKE ROOM FOR DADDY, and (b) the handyman on shows like THE JACK BENNY PROGRAM and TROUBLE WITH FATHER did nothing to portray realistically black people as they lived in American culture. Many of the portrayals, in fact, were detrimental to all that Nat King Cole, Steve Allen and Ed Sullivan attempted to do on their respective shows.

In practically all instances except one, blacks were shown on a continuing basis when they worked in a white

household or was a regular on a variety show. They never had a steady companion or a friend of substance or never a sustained, intelligent conversation. The one exception was the "Amos 'n Andy Show", a television show which definitely highlighted Black talent and showed that indeed Black people lived full and rewarding lives. It demonstrated further that they did not all live in slums and ghettos; that Blacks had jobs other than those of cleaning, cooking and taking care of white people's babies; and that they could be sensitive, warm and caring parents. These positive images, however, were shown very seldomly and were often profoundly over-shadowed by the negative and racist imagery projected by the series.

The series, THE AMOS 'N ANDY SHOW, was a patronizing picture of Black America. The characters were treated as immature children given to pranks, malapropisms, and weak imitations of white society. It was a highly false interpretation of the Black reality, for it unfairly lulled whites into complacency and reduced Blacks to a position of inferiority, causing them to continue to perpetuate myths (2).

The series perpetuated the myth of the Black matriarch, the castrating Black female, the domineering, overpowering Black woman. These characteristics were portrayed by Sapphire, Kingfish's wife, and her mother, Mama, who lived with them and who found every conceivable thing wrong with

her daughter's husband. These two women were caricatures of Black femininity. Though Sapphire was portrayed by a very attractive Black woman, Ernestine Wade, she was made to look and act shrewish and overbearing.

The men were classic minstrel types. Not one spoke grammatically. Their mispronunciations illustrated their basic and deep-seated ignorance about everything. They were constantly being devastated by abusive women. The men were never shown working, even though it was a show with at least two Black families. The closest thing to working we were privileged to see was Amos in his taxi (always without a fare) and Calhoun, the lawyer, helping Kingfish swindle money from Andy or some other unsuspecting soul.

Neither were there role models in the women. They were all unsalaried housewives. The only professional represented in the cast was Calhoun, but his use of the English language was as ungrammatical or maybe worse than that of Lightning, the janitor, who spoke so slowly and inaudibly that it was often difficult to understand him.

This first Black television family lived in the ghetto, but its members did not receive welfare nor were their surroundings blighted. It was easy for whites to watch for there was never a racial, social, economic, or political issue discussed. No one was discriminated against, and no

one was hungry or complaining about not working or working in unchallenging, unfulfilling jobs. They were all "satisfied" with their conditions.

An interesting aside about the AMOS 'N ANDY SHOW relative to its long lasting impact is that it was only produced for two seasons, 1951-1953. However, the show continued in syndication until 1966 after years of litigation by Black people and their organizations to have it removed from the airways.(3)

Hadn't there been newsworthy items that captured the attention of the news media, it is fair to note, the image of Black people would have been totally distorted, one dimensional and without any redeeming human value.

Despite the fact that the Civil Rights Movement and African National Independence Movements were going on, and basically that Black people lived and worked, had experiences, and died, no other show about the Black Family was aired on a continuous basis until JULIA, another innocuous safe series that did not pretend to address issues that were relevant to Black concerns of the sixties. Instead, this series focused on the day to day life of a single professional, self-supporting mother who lived in a sterile world. The fact that her husband had been an officer in the armed forces and had been killed in combat

gave the show a quality of believability to white audiences, but caused a great deal of criticism from the Black community.

JULIA only continued to perpetuate the racial stereotype of the Black matriarch because she never encountered racial prejudice at work nor in the integrated, well kept, very middle class apartment building in which she lived. At another level, the show seemed to have been designed to subvert the aims and purposes of national civil rights activists. It was meant, some argued, to asuage white consciences and to make President Richard Nixon's militant actions toward the people of the Black ghettos more palatable. (4)

The JULIA series was such a "white wash" that even whites came to feel uncomfortable with this patronizing portrayal of how Black life could be if Blacks did not riot, but wait their turn, and work within the capitalist system. The networks countered these criticisms by saying that television is an entertainment medium; that the show was not meant to be socially and politically relevant.

Despite the conflicting pressures, JULIA was well received by viewers, for afterall it was the first Black Family show since AMOS 'N ANDY -- and what a difference it was!! JULIA showed on a weekly basis that Black people

did not all live in the ghetto; that they went to professional jobs everyday; that they could have fewer than five children in a household; that they could speak impeccable English; could wear attractive clothes without being a prostitute or royalty; and that they could have little crises that had nothing to do with white folks. JULIA was a positive role model. The problem was that she was too positive, so much so that she was an implausible character.

Although Blacks remained on television in mostly supporting roles in the 1970s, not another television family was created until SANFORD AND SON. With this production, we witnessed a return to the Black minstrels, for throughout the 1970s we were assaulted with variations on this theme in terms of Black families on television. We were shown THE JEFFERSONS, GOOD TIMES, WHAT'S HAPPENING, and DIFF'RENT STROKES.

Each of these shows had very wide appeal, all enjoying top ratings variously from 1972 until 1983. These shows highlighted Black talent in a way that had never been done before. Blacks were stars of their shows, but the quality of the characterizations compromised many of the goals of the Civil Rights Movement. They portrayed the "coon" --that is, those characters who were loud, conniving and ostentatious. This image was portrayed in the show THE

JEFFERSONS by Sherman Hemsley in the character of boisterous George Jefferson for ten years and by Jimmy Walker as grinning J.J. in the production GOOD TIMES for five years. We also had the loud but lovable "mammy" types as shown in the character of Louise Jefferson and Florence the maid of THE JEFFERSONS, and Aunt Esther, a very loud, overbearing, purse swinging, swearing character created by LaWanda Page in SANFORD AND SON.

The most disgusting of these "mammies" is the role Nell Carter plays, discussed below, as the maid/momma to three white teenagers (and before his death, their father), a white boy and a white grandfather. Defenders of shows of this type claim that the difference between these comedies and those of years past, such as THE AMOS 'N ANDY SHOW, is that these shows had socially relevant themes and that the comedy format made the substantive issues that were raised more palatable to the general public and easier for them to be accepted.

It is true that these situation comedies dealt with issues like rape, mastectomy, venereal disease, racism, poverty, welfare, unemployment, and did it in such a way that some consciences were raised, but it also brought to the forefront long forgotten stereotypes and introduced to a generation of Blacks and whites an era of racism, racial

slurs and racial images that would have been best forever lost.

With the 1970s situation comedies on the black family, we were told once again that all Blacks lived in the ghetto, were poor, lazy, unemployed and if not on welfare, were living from hand to mouth. Those who were industrious like the father and mother on GOOD TIMES and Mama Thompson on WHAT'S HAPPENING would lose their jobs and find it difficult to get another. Those who were lazy and not really looking for work could find jobs easily and were not satisfied with them, like J.J. of GOOD TIMES and Lamont's friend on SANFORD AND SON.

To counter the negative stereotpes of poverty created by SANFORD AND SON, GOOD TIMES, and WHAT'S HAPPENING, we were given THE JEFFERSONS, a self-made, self-sufficient millionaire with a loving wife, a well behaved, intelligent son, and a wise-cracking maid. George Jefferson owned several dry-cleaning stores; employed blacks and whites; contributed (through his wife) time and money to worthy causes; and extolled (through his son) black consciousness. For every positive feature of THE JEFFERSONS, the character of George had at least two negatives. He was not only loud and boisterous, he was ostentatious, ignorant, a bigot, and a chauvinist.

In these black series, there were usually enough of a mixture of the ridiculous and the serious to keep something of a balance, fragile though it was. With GOOD TIMES, however, the ridiculous simply outweighed the serious concerns that were atttempted in the production. J. J., the loud mouthed, grinning "coon" of a son on the show received too much attention from the writers and therefore considerable negative criticisms from the public.

The co-star, John Amos, was among the loudest critics. He was a highly principled actor who cared a great deal about how black people were portrayed on television. He understood, moreover, the power of television and how difficult it is to erase an image from the public's mind, especially one which supports a stereotype. J. J. was simply a younger version of Kingfish of AMOS N' ANDY fame. He had a trademark saying, "dyn-o-mite" that was reminiscent of Kingfish's "holy Mack'l" that was so often heard on THE AMOS N' ANDY SHOW. The J.J. character also popped his eyeballs a lot and showed a huge toothy grin often at inappropriate times.

Despite the strong, proud, determined image of the father and the loving, respectful, supportive mother figure, it was hard to counter J. J.'s image. John Amos left the show as he noticed more and more buffoon and coon parts for J.J. Esther Rolle who played the role of the mother left

a short time later. The show was finally canceled in 1979, five years after it was first aired.

Sadly, the 1980s continued perpetuating negative stereotypes, while at the same time pretending to be responsive to demands for more black programming and more black actors. Television became more blatant with assertions that if blacks were to be successful, well educated, properly brought up in a supportive, nourishing middle class environment, it was necessary for there to be white people at the head of each of the households.

DIFF'RENT STROKES was created as an example of this theory. This show centered around the antics and life situations of two young black boys, orphaned by the housekeeper of a rich man who lived with his young daughter on New York City's Park Avenue. The maid gets her boss to promise that he will take care of her children after she dies. He complies and we have another patently stereotypical situation comedy with the great benevolent white father showering good cheer, wisdom, wealth and a prolem-free, healthy home environment on two black ghetto children.

Arnold, the central character, and his brother, Willis, are virtually a rehash of the little pickaninnies (5). Willis is straight man to Arnold's jokes. He is, as J. J.,

a classic Kingfish with his stock response of "wha'cha talkin' 'bout, Willis?" The Arnold character is smart alecky, prankish, and egocentric. The role is that of a small child, but a teenager was chosen to play it. That in itself is a negative commentary on the ability of young Gary Coleman, who plays Arnold, to act his age, or to be considered anything other than a kind of 'freak'. This theme is played out in another series as noted below.

If there is anything that is well known about the culture of black people, even in the United States, it is the importance of the extended family. The only times these boys were visited by relatives was when these family members wanted to "con" Mr. Drummond, the white benevolent father of the series, out of a large sum of money. Naturally, the boys exposed their relatives for what they were and Mr. Drummond acted in the fashion of a big hearted, benevolent great white father and forgave them all. (6)

Such is a familiar theme in the series WEBSTER, another show which capitalizes on the unfortunate growth problems of a Black teenager and casts him as a younger child. He even has friends who are intelligent white children who are cast at their chronological ages. However, the main character, Webster, acts like and is given parts to speak as if he is a child of about nine years old.

Webster was orphaned by his professional football star father and his wife who had asked George Pappadopalous, his closest friend on the team, to be their child's godfather. George is simply carrying out his responsibility as a godfather, raising Webster, together with his wife, to the best of his ability with lots of love.

WEBSTER, too, has an extended family. As a matter of fact, the young boy has a very loving uncle, yet the uncle also decides that Webster is somehow much better off living with his white "mom ("ma'm") and dad". However, since the story lines are not at all socially relevant, and the problems Webster encounters are no different from other kids, there is really no reason why his adoptive parents could not have been black.

And then we were given the classic, the oldest stereotype in the history of America: The black "mammy" to "massa's three little children". GIMME A BREAK stars Nell Carter, a robust, happy, musical, loud, self deprecating maid in an all-white household. When this show was introduced and later flourished in the ratings, many critics felt that television no longer even attempted to be socially responsible.

It seems that as far as television is concerned, there will always be one ethnic group. Every other group has mixed, mingled and become a part of humanity, but not black people.(7)

It was not until 1984 that television began to seriously address black families on a continuing basis. There was no longer one show or series on which all the burdens of the race must be heaped.

There were now three black television families, THE COSBY SHOW, CHARLIE AND COMPANY, and 227, all starting between 1984 and 1986. The three families were from different socio-economic backgrounds, although two were very similar. Neither of the three deals with overt racism and neither is blatantly different in substance from any other series which focuses on the family. There are, of course, subtleties which give one show the edge on the other two. But basically these shows were about any family and its daily life situations.

Of the three series, CHARLIE AND COMPANY was the weakest. The casting, for example, was done poorly, so the elder son does not seem to belong to the family unit. The scripts are usually thin as they attempt to show

off the comedic talents of its star, Flip Wilson, a stand-up comic. The acting talents of the children exceed those of the mother and father, who were in fact novices--the character of the mother was played by a popular singer, Gladys Knight.

The family is middle class, with the father employed by the Transportation Department of the City of Chicago, the mother is a public school teacher, and they live together with their children in their home. The father is shown often at his office which he shares (mostly jokes) with four other employees, one a Hispanic. The show provided wholesome entertainment, using several cultures to interact.

227 is a situation comedy about a Black family who lives in Washington, D. C.. They are lower middle class and are able to live comfortably -- even share their resources at times with their neighbors. They rent their apartment and share the usual problems encountered by renters of an old building in a neighborhood that is beginning to cater to condominiums for young upwardly mobile whites (or Yuppies). The family is a more traditional family unit in that the father clearly is the head of the household and he is a construction worker foreman. The mother does not work outside the home, but primarily cares for her budding teenage daughter, leaving the more serious problems, however, for her husband to handle when he gets home. She

is, however, very civic-minded, often taking the lead in community concerns.

This family also does not live in a social vacuum, for much of the focus of the show is with the neighbors, who are primarily a single woman-parent, an elderly retired woman who is raising a young teenage grandson, and Sondra. All of these, however, live as well as Mary, the central character and her family. The only other person besides Lester, Mary's husband, who is gainfully employed, is Sondra, the brunt of all of the conversations because she is single and attractive, and her clothes, walk, voice and general demeanor say that she is 'available'; moreover, she gets lots of male attention and she flaunts it.

The problems Mary deals with are problems that all mothers and wives sooner or later must face: her daughter wanting to date before the family is ready; the attention paid her daughter by a particular older teenage boy; children defying their parents; the seeming interest of her husband in another woman; the husband taking her for granted; whether or not to leave a note of identification on a parked car that she accidentally struck, etc. All her predicaments make for good, light, wholesome entertainment. She does not have to act a buffoon to get a laugh, and she does not emasculate her husband or berate his family. Though she and her friends are a little bit jealous of

Sondra, they never resort to speaking of her as a prostitute or a "loose woman". Sondra is respected as a person.

The Children of 227 sometimes prefer, in fact, to speak to Sondra about their "problems" and though she may go a bit overboard, the children's parents know they can trust her to be responsible in her advice. The series does not carry the weight of the entire black world; it is not angry; it does not espouse a particular political point of view. No one grins or wisecracks unnecessarily or shuffles aimlessly. The production may or may not be an award winner or top the Neilson charts, but it will not be criticized for its failure to address black concerns or for its emphasis on minstrelsy.

The ultimate black family television production to date is THE COSBY SHOW. It has all the elements necessary for a successful production. It has excellent script writers, high priced and respected sponsors, a superb production crew--several members of which are black, seasoned directors, and a well educated, highly trained, experienced, attractive, "all-American" black cast, hand-picked by the star of the show, Bill Cosby.

THE COSBY SHOW is about a black upper middle class family. The husband is a medical doctor; the wife is a

practicing attorney; their five children are bright, witty and full of mischief. The family did not just appear from nowhere--it has historical roots. The audience is told where the family came from: grandparents are a part of the show--on a continuing basis; we are introduced to family friends and teachers, and occasionally, to the parents' co-workers. The children are not perfect: they fight; they take things without first asking permission; they make bad grades in school, sometimes; they pretend to study; the son keeps an atrociously dirty room; they abuse privileges; and they talk back, with various results, to their parents, but they love and respect each other--and their love is effusive.

The series is black not because it deals with racial issues or prejudice, or because there are poor people on the shows, or because it espouses a particular political point of view. It does none of these things. The series is unmistakably black because of the SYMBOLS associated with it. The main character, Cliff Huxtable, wears sweat shirts from black colleges and universities; black paintings fill his home; famous black people appear on the shows; and black teachers, among others, who represent strong role-models are introduced.

On Dr. Martin Luther King's National Birthday Celebration, there was not a lesson on the Civil Rights Movement, but in the final scene of the show, and after a particularly angry fight scene between two of the daughters, everyone, including a youthful visitor, silently watched the television set as it displayed the 1964 March on Washington and King's extraordinary Speech. Moreover, during the height of the Free South Africa demonstrations around the United States, an Anti-Apartheid poster was prominently displayed in the Huxtable residence.

Dr. Alvin Poussaint, the noted psychiatrist, has pointed out that it is unnecessary and racist to always place all the burdens and problems of the black race on the shoulders of black people and black television shows. It sets these shows up for certain-death and predictable negative criticism. (8)

Naturally, THE COSBY SHOW, as one of the top ranking continuing series on television today, has its critics. Mostly these critics discuss aspects of the same topic: it is not black enough; it is not relevant enough; and it is not true to the life of the black family. The debates and discussions will continue for as long as there are more than one lifestyle which characterizes the black family.

Marketability has always been the central concern for any television show. If the shows disturb the innate sensibility of the viewing audience, they will not be viewed. And if no one watches, production companies and television stations lose money.

Shows like THE JEFFERSONS appealed to the public, for it was a top rated show for years. For blacks, it showed an upwardly mobile couple going from 'rags to riches'. Though George Jefferson was a loud-mouthed buffoon, at least he did not shuffle; he strutted. He did not scratch his head and bow in deference to white folks; he showed that blacks found them as distasteful as they found blacks. To whites, there was the ease of observing blacks in a setting that said if they behaved and worked hard, they could live like whites. The show catered to whites' stereotypical image of black people. On a whole, it said that black people were different; they are separate and distinct from other Americans; that no matter what the political, social, and economic situation, they just are not regular human beings.

At a National Conference in 1980 on the image of black television families, Tony Brown and Lester Strong, individually, asserted that shows like THE JEFFERSONS, GOOD TIMES, DIFF'RENT STROKES, AMOS N' ANDY, and SANFORD AND SON were appealing precisely because these images do not disturb or dispute the overall view of black people generally held in

the minds of the viewing American audience. Images that are incongruent with established beliefs cause mental tensions. Correct and strong images would be inconsistent with the reasons people watch television: to escape from the sameness of everyday life, and escape to fantasy. black families, therefore, became "narrow, negative, stereotypical portrayals designed to reflect what television producers and distributors believe the majority of the American market/public imagines black families to be". (9)

The theory of the "comforting image" has emerged now among scholars in their effort to analyze and offer explanations for the continuing stereotypical images which characterize American television regarding black family life. (10)

This continuing negative portrayal of black people is disconcerting now both to whites and black people, finally. It appears that people are beginning to realize that their neighbors regardless of their skin colorations are much like themselves. They share many of the same experiences, laugh and cry at many of the same atrocities, react similarly to negative and positive influences, etc. black people, however, are over due for fair treatment and a change of image in television, just like in real life.

THE COSBY SHOW and 227 are well on the way to making an impact and to changing the stereotypical image of the black Family on television in the United States.

NOTES

1. N B C DECLARATION OF STANDARDS AND PRACTICES. Revised, 1951.

2. J. Fred MacDonald. BLACKS ON WHITE TV: AFRO-AMERICANS IN TELEVISION SINCE 1948. Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1983, p. 33.

3. Op. Cit., p. 29.

4. IBID., p. 117.

5. IBID., p. 198.

6. DIFF'RENT STROKES.

7. Robert MacKenzie. "Review: Gimme A Break", TV GUIDE, January 9, 1982, p. 23.

8. Alvin Poussaint. Personal Interview with Judi Moore-Smith. March 1, 1985, Cambridge, Mass.

9. Tony Brown. "Television and the Black Family: The Role of Government", in Anthony Jackson, editor. BLACK FAMILIES AND THE MEDIUM OF TELEVISION. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1982, pp. 83-85.

10. Lester Strong. "Blacks, Television and Ratings", in Anthony Jackson, editor. BLACK FAMILIES AND THE MEDIUM OF TELEVISION. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1982, pp. 27-32.